

125 AGING ISSUES

Assessing senior driver competency a delicate issue

(The following information was provided by the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging.)

When an older loved one seems to have lost the ability to drive, but he or she refuses to give up the keys, how can you get an objective assessment of their skills and capabilities?

Trying to gauge when someone no longer has the physical or mental skills to operate a car on their own is one of the toughest decisions with which a family must deal. It's not very hard to figure out why. Driving represents freedom and independence.

And in the many rural areas of the state without strong systems of mass transit, giving up the keys is more than symbolic; it means giving up the ability to handle basic errands such as shopping or going to the doctor.

That's one reason the Office on Aging focuses on helping communities build transportation programs designed to serve older people. As the population ages, that single issue will become an increasingly important component in the overall strategy of building senior friendly communities in South Carolina. But regardless of mass transit or other transportation options, deciding when someone is no longer has the physical skills to drive themselves will always be a tough call. The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED) offers a fact sheet of tips to look for when assessing an older person's driving skills on its Web site at www.driver-ed.org.

In addition, many professional physical or occupational therapists who specialize in helping people who have become disabled through a stroke, accident or other injury regain their driving skills are turning their attention to providing assessments -- and rehabilitative therapy when needed -- for individuals whose driving skills may be waning due simply to old age.

Another excellent program for older adult drivers is the

AARP's 55 Alive mature driver education course, which can help older drivers improve skills and avoid traffic crashes and traffic violations. This two-day "refresher" class helps mature drivers to brush up on their driving-related knowledge and increase their awareness of defensive-driving techniques. In addition, South Carolina residents 55 or older who complete the course receive a discounted rate on their automobile insurance. Contact AARP South Carolina at (888) 227- 7669 for more information. You can also contact your family doctor or a geriatric medicine program at a hospital that serves your area to get help finding someone who can perform a complete driving skills assessment.

As we all age, changes occur in physical functioning, vision, perception, and processing abilities that could make driving unsafe. While changes are inevitable, they occur at different rates in each individual, and age alone is not a good indicator of driving skills. Most often these changes occur slowly over a long period of time, and the individual is able to compensate for minor deficits. If several skill areas are affected, or there is a sudden change in abilities due to illness or disease, driving may become impaired. An evaluation is recommended if you or those who drive with you notice any of the following warning signs:

- Doesn't observe signs, signals, or other traffic.
 - Needs help or instructions from passengers.
 - Slow or poor decisions.
 - Easily frustrated or confused.
 - Frequently gets lost, even in familiar areas.
 - Inappropriate driving speeds (too fast or too slow).
 - Poor road position or wide turns.
 - Accidents or near misses.
- A driver rehabilitation specialist can provide a comprehensive evaluation and make rec-

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